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## Art Masterpiece: *Tree of Life*, by Gustav Klimt

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**Keywords:** Art Nouveau, symbolism, line and shape

**Grade(s):** 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>

**Activity:** Tree of Life painting



### About the Artist:

- Gustav Klimt was born in Austria, the second of seven children-- three boys and four girls. His father, Ernst Klimt, was a gold engraver, who was financially unsuccessful.
- Klimt lived in poverty for most of his childhood. Klimt was enrolled, at 14, in the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts in 1876, where he studied until 1883, and received training as an architectural decorator.
- Klimt began his painting career by painting interior murals in large public buildings.
- In 1897, Klimt was the leader of a group of Austrian artists dedicated to artistic freedom and a style of art known as *Art Nouveau*. Art Nouveau is French and it means “new art.” It is characterized by the use of organic shapes and dramatic, curving lines. Many of its themes are taken from nature, though presented quite abstractly, including plants, flowers, and naturally curved lines.

- Klimt began painting landscapes and portraits of wealthy Viennese ladies, receiving the support of loyal patrons. The radiant women in his portraits seem to appear in a kaleidoscope of geometric shapes, spirals, flowers, and golden decorations.
- Gustav Klimt created many of his paintings at the Vienna Workshop and incorporated the finest and most luxurious materials at his disposal including marble, gold-leaf, silver and semi-precious stones to create a succession of beautiful oil paintings, including the *Tree Of Life*.
- One final interesting fact about Klimt is that his portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (shown below) sold in 2006 at auction for more money than any other painting ever had before: \$135 million! A movie was made about this painting called *Woman in Gold*.



### **About the Artwork:**

The “Tree of Life” is an important symbol used by many different religions and cultures. It signifies the connection between heaven and earth and the underworld.

Gustav Klimt's *Tree of Life* painting has a lot of symbolism. Symbolism is the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. For example, this symbol \$ means money, specifically it means one American dollar. This symbol & means the word “and.” Can you think of other symbols you commonly see? Smiley faces, heart shapes, and thumbs up, are all good examples of symbolism.

Look at the shapes and lines in *The Tree of Life*. They are done in a bold and original manner. The swirling branches twist, twirl, turn, and spiral, reaching for

the sky. The roots turn into the earth beneath, creating the connection between heaven and earth. The two women on either side of the Tree signify Klimt's belief that females preside over every living thing that is born, grows, and then returns back into the earth. For example, "Mother Nature" would be a good symbol of this.

Another interpretation is that the Tree, reaching for the sky, is a symbol of man's perpetual yearning for becoming more, yet his roots are still bound to the earth. Roots can also signify "home" (i.e. "returning to one's roots" means to return to the place you grew up.)

Klimt uses the richness of gold leaf, silver, pearls, and semi-precious stones to illustrate a magical world. The black bird is a reminder that everything that has a beginning also has an end, as black birds have been used as a symbol of death by many cultures.

### **Possible Questions:**

1. Does this tree look like a real tree? What is different about it? What is the same?
2. What shapes do the tree branches make? (Very swirly and curly lines.)
3. What colors did Klimt use? Are they colors like a real tree?
4. What do you see on the ground and in the tree trunk? (Point out the repeated patterns of squarish shapes with the dot in the center.) What do you think this might be? (They could be flowers, seed pods, and fruits.)



5. Does this tree look fancy and decorative? Why do you think Klimt used gold leaf instead of gold-colored paint? (To show the importance and richness of life; also real gold is more brilliant-colored than gold paint.)

**Activity:** Students will paint their own Tree of Life.

### **Materials Needed:**

- Brown construction paper, 12" X 18," one per student

- Metallic gold paint (*Sargent* makes a metallic tempera; metallic gold acrylic paints are also an option.)
- Small tip brushes, one per student
- Sequins
- Paper plates or plastic paint palettes
- Glue
- Black tempera paint OR black markers (optional)
- White tempera paint (optional)
- Oil pastels (optional)
- Newspaper (optional, to cover desks)

**Process:**

1. Pass out the paper, paint, and brushes.
2. Have students write their name on the back of their papers.
3. Everyone should design their own interpretation and vision of the *Tree of Life*.
4. Have them dip their paint brushes in the gold paint and have the students start by painting the trunk of the tree. Some children will have a tendency to draw the trunk quite straight, so make sure to show them how to paint the trunk in fluid motions by drawing the sides swaying as opposed to drawing straight lines. As they paint, remind the students that:
  - a. Klimt's *Tree of Life* has swirly branches. Extend branches from the center and use swirls at the tips of each branch.
  - b. The tree should fill up most of the paper space. Encourage the students to be creative with the way they paint the branches and how they spread them out on the paper.
  - c. The tree trunk could be any shape but relatively thick, and
  - d. There should be no visible leaves, just branches.
5. Pour a small amount (a few tablespoons) of sequins into small disposable dishes. Three or four students can share a plate. As the paint dries (it should dry fairly quickly) pass out the sequins.
6. When the students are finished painting they can add sequins to embellish their tree, like Klimt did with semi-precious stones. You may want to show them how they only need a DOT of paint for each sequin. (Don't let them

spread the glue thickly and pour the sequins of top.) Students can add sequins even if their paint is still a bit wet.

7. Hang to display.

*\*\*OPTIONAL\*\* (IF there is time AND the gold paint is dry.)*

8. Use some white tempera paint and paint over parts of the gold paint. Let these areas dry completely and then the children can paint over these patches of white with black paint to make patterns or designs. Another option is for the students to use oil pastels to add designs. (Only on completely DRY paint.)
9. Another step is to use black paint (or a black marker) to outline all of the tree branches. Make sure the gold paint is dry before adding marker or you will ruin your marker.

Examples:



**Parent Note:**

Gustav Klimt (1862 – 1918) was an Austrian symbolist painter and one of the most prominent members of the Vienna Art Nouveau movement. His *Tree of Life* is noted for its symbolism as well as Klimt's use of gold leaf and semi-precious stones.

Today, during Art Masterpiece, students designed and painted their own interpretation of a Tree of Life.



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